

Randolph of Roanoke and the Mind of the South

By RUSSELL KIRK

*For sixteen years a Congressman and
Senator, John Randolph was the most gifted conservative
spokesman of the American South*

*They who love change, who delight in confusion,
who wish to feed the cauldron and make it
bubble, may vote if they please for future
changes. But by what spell, by what formula
are you going to bind all the people to all future
time? Quis custodiet custodes?*

JOHN RANDOLPH OF ROANOKE, the most singular great man in American history, spoke thus before the Virginia Constitutional Convention in 1829. "I am an aristocrat; I love liberty, I hate equality," he had told the American nation years before. Madame de Châtenay's description of Joubert would have been appropriate to Randolph: "Like a spirit which has found a body by accident, and manages with it as best it may." At the Convention, his tall, cadaverous figure; his flaming eyes like a devil's or an angel's; his bony, accusing finger that had punctuated the prosecution of Justice Chase nearly three decades gone; his tormented face, half a boy's, half a corpse's, framed by his straight black hair which was a memento of his ancestress, Pocahontas; his flood of extemporaneous eloquence like a prophet's inspired—for a generation, Congress and America had beheld this Ishmael of politics, this slave-holding *ami des noirs*, this old-school planter, this

fantastic duellist, this fanatic enemy of corruption, this implacable St. Michael who had denounced Adams and Jefferson and Madison and Monroe and Clay and Webster and Calhoun with impartial detestation. All his career, Randolph had dosed himself with brandy to dull the pain of that sickness which, nevertheless, let him live until he was sixty; and now he was turning to opium. He was a man who sometimes saw devils on the stairs; he was a man who told a visitor to his lonely cabin on the Roanoke River in Southside Virginia, "In the next room a being is sitting at a table, writing a dead man's will with a dead man's hand." And he was also endowed with genius, the prophet of Southern nationalism and the architect of conservatism in the Southern States.

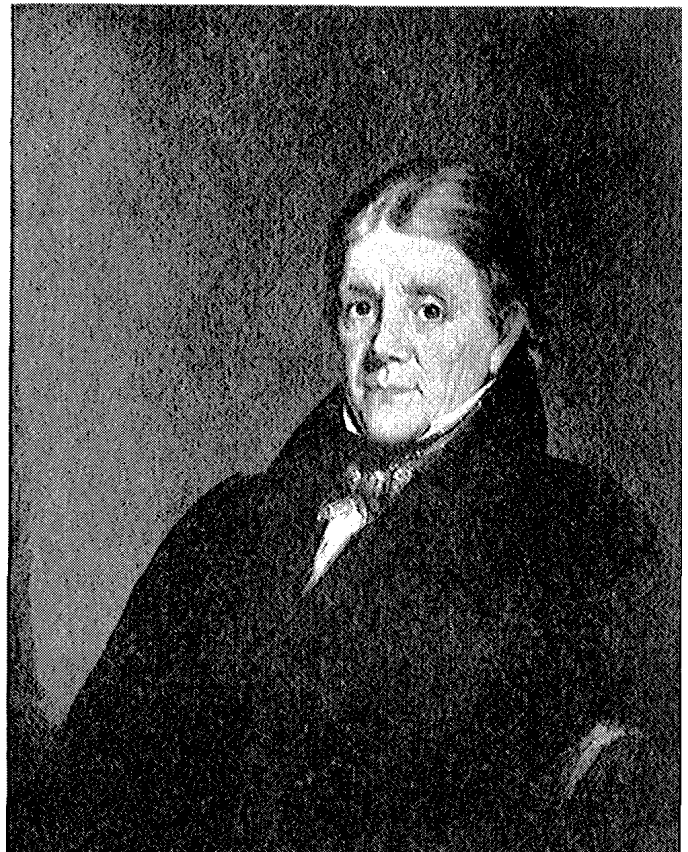
The conservative polity in the South, which can be traced all the way from signers of the Constitution like George Mason to the present generation of Southern congressmen, has been inspired by four impulses: a half-indolent distaste for alteration; a determination to preserve an agricultural society; a love of local rights; and a sensitivity about the negro question—the "peculiar institution" before the Civil War, the colour-line thereafter. During the

early years of the Republic, the first three motives much overshadowed the last ; but by 1806, the dilemma of negro slavery began to creep into the foreground of national politics ; and by 1824, John Randolph demonstrated that the problem of slavery was inescapably linked with a loose or strict interpretation of the federal constitution, with state rights, and with the possibility of internal improvements in the several states at federal expense. From 1824 onward, the slavery controversy confuses and blurs any analysis of political principle in the South : the historian can scarcely discern where real love for state rights leaves off and interested pleading for slave-property begins. Both Randolph and John C. Calhoun deliberately entangled the debate on tariffs (at bottom a question of whether the industrial or the agricultural interest should predominate in America) and the debate on local liberties with the debate on slavery ; thus they were able to rally to their camp a great body of slaveholders who otherwise might have been indifferent to the issues at stake. Years after Appomattox, at a convention of Confederate veterans, that magnificent, simple cavalryman General Nathan Bedford Forrest listened to a series of eloquent speeches from his old comrades in arms, by way of apologia for the lost cause, in which slavery was barely mentioned. Then Forrest rose up, disgruntled, and announced that if he had not thought he was fighting to keep his niggers, and help other folks keep their niggers, he never would have gone to war in the first place. Human slavery is bad ground for conservatives to make a stand upon ; yet it needs to be remembered that the wild demands and expectations of the abolitionists were quite as slippery a foundation for political decency. The whole grim slavery problem, to which no satisfactory answer was possible, warped and inflamed the American political mind, on either side of the debate, for the earlier two-thirds of the nineteenth century. So far as it is possible, we need to try to keep clear here of that partisan controversy over slavery and to penetrate, instead, beneath the froth of abolitionist harangues and the flames of Southern fire-eating to those conservative ideas which Randolph and his successor Calhoun enunciated.



JOHN RANDOLPH as a young man, by Gilbert Stuart
Below : Randolph in middle life, by Chester Harding

Both by courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington



Both Randolph the Virginian and Calhoun the South Carolinian began as democrats and, after a fashion, as radicals. When less than thirty years old, Representative John Randolph was the dreaded master of the Jeffersonian House and Senate of the United States ; rejoicing in the collapse of the Federalist party at the election of 1800, he was determined to break the conservative power of the federal judiciary. At a similar age, a decade later, Representative John C. Calhoun was a War Hawk, a nationalist, an exponent of improvements in communications and industrial resources at the cost of the federal treasury, and a general innovator. But Randolph developed into the American disciple of Burke, and Calhoun was converted by his early adversary into the Cast-Iron Man, unalterably opposed to "progress," centralization, and abstract humanitarianism. They became conservatives because they perceived that the strong drift of the world was not toward the tranquil, agricultural decentralized life they loved, but toward a consolidated and industrialized new order. They rallied round them the planter-society of the South, and from 1860 to 1865 the South rendered to the ideas of Randolph and Calhoun the last full measure of devotion. They were conservatives because they believed in government from the bottom upwards, not in government from the top downwards.

Between the conservatism of the Federalists—especially as it was advocated by Alexander Hamilton—and the conservatism which arose south of Mason's and Dixon's line, a gulf was fixed. The Federalists believed that certain ancient values of society—security of property, stable government, respect for religious principle, recognition of beneficial distinctions between man and man—could best be protected by a strong common government, vested with extensive powers—capable, indeed, of indefinite expansion. Southerners were convinced that consolidation, political or economic, would breach the wall of tradition and establish in America a unitary state, arbitrary, omniscient, manipulated for the exclusive benefit of a dominant majority, told by the head—and within that majority, for the benefit of the masters of the new manufacturing industries. In modern America—so far as

conservatism can be said to retain a philosophical existence in the minds of politicians—both these conservative impulses still contend against each other and against their common enemies.

Except for Randolph and Calhoun and certain Southern writers in very recent years, the mind of the South has had few competent apologists. Rural societies almost always labour under this disadvantage : cities breed the casuist and the energumen. Yet beneath the violence of the Southern orator and the languor of the Southern private citizen, one can make out a set of assumptions or characteristics, expressed only dimly but none the less real, which gives the Southern conservative tradition its curious tenacity. In his Congressional speeches, John Randolph of Roanoke erected these prejudices and interests into principles :

" I have said, on a former occasion, and if I were Philip, I would employ a man to say it every day, that the people of this country, if ever they lose their liberties, will do it by sacrificing some great principle of government to temporary passion. There are certain great principles, which if they be not held inviolate, at all seasons, our liberty is gone. If we give them up, it is perfectly immaterial what is the character of our Sovereign ; whether he be King or President, elective or hereditary—it is perfectly immaterial what is his character—we shall be slaves. It is not an elective government which will preserve us."

In 1813, when he expressed these opinions, John Randolph had made himself one of the most unpopular men in the United States, unpopular even in the South, for he had cried out against the war with Britain as it approached and he had denounced the conduct of the war after it began. In later years, a considerable measure of the earlier popularity which had made him the booted and spurred master of Congress returned to him and, except for one brief interval, the fascination he exerted over his immediate constituents never failed him. As his half-brother Beverley Tucker remarked, Randolph's very eccentricities seemed to make him, in the eyes of the planters who flocked round the orator at Charlotte Court House, like some Moslem dervish invested with wisdom more than human, despite his madness. Then, too, Virginia was not yet wholly democratic ; only freeholders voted, and the county courts filtered democracy through their sieve. Demo-

cracy generally exhibits an antipathy for eccentricity or any other manifestation of defiant singularity (as Tocqueville observed), and it is unlikely that a candidate of Randolph's poetic fancy and wild temper could obtain election to-day. He lived like a knight-errant, and confessed to an intimate, near the end of his life, that he had been a Quixote. He was at once the terror and the delight of Virginia. "I was not born to endure a master," he once wrote; and, again, "I am like a man without a skin."

But we are concerned here with Randolph's mind. Like Burke's, his intellect was fertile and complex. His political career was no less intricate than Burke's, and similarly consistent, all the same. Because Randolph loved freedom, he could not abide the centralizing intent of Federalism; and because he detested cant and the degradation of the democratic dogma, he could not abide Jeffersonianism. His fervent effort to obstruct the ominous Federalism of the Supreme Court—that is, the impeachment and trial of Justice Chase, in 1805—ended in failure, and Randolph's friendly foe John Marshall, one of the few leaders of the age whom Randolph respected and loved, went placidly about his work of consolidation. When presently Randolph's discontent with Jefferson's administration was brought to boiling-point by the Yazoo scandals, the bulk of the Republican party stuck with the president, who had prizes to bestow and protection to extend, and Randolph was left in a hopeless minority with his obdurate Old Republicans, men vowed to political purity, strict construction of the Constitution, extreme economy in government, hard money and no state debt, peace with all the world, and the agricultural life.

"Beaten down, horse, foot, and dragoons," was Randolph's own account of the state into which the Old Republicans, the Tertium Quids, had fallen after the enactment of Jefferson's Embargo during the Napoleonic wars. This was a time of frightful damage to the Southern economy through the non-intercourse acts, the Embargo, the War of 1812, and protective tariffs; it was the era of internal improvements at federal expense, westward expansion, the power of the Bank of

the United States, loose construction of the Constitution, and increasing federal domination over the several states. A single eloquent voice kept the spirit of state rights and old ways alive in the public consciousness—until, after the debate over admitting Missouri to the Union, in 1820, the Southern states began to revert to their earlier principles; and Vice-President Calhoun, pondering austere, from his chair above the Senate, the interminable coruscations of Senator Randolph's speeches, was transmuted from an expansionist into a conservative. "Highly talented, eloquent, severe, and eccentric"—this is Calhoun's description of the man of Roanoke—"not unfrequently wandering from the question, but often uttering wisdom worthy of a Bacon, and wit that would not discredit a Sheridan, every Speaker has freely indulged him in his peculiar manner, and that without responsibility or censure."

The source of a great part of the wisdom of Randolph was Burke—and of Randolph's searing wit, too: such well-known Randolphian retorts to his opponents as "the little dogs and all, Blanche, Tray, and Sweetheart, see, they bark at me" are drawn from Shakespeare, of course—but Burke had quoted from Lear for precisely the same purpose. Randolph made no secret of his indebtedness to Burke, and that Randolph's colleagues did not recognize more often the quarter from which his inspiration came is evidence to support his remark that one dared quote only Shakespeare and Milton to Congressmen. "We very much doubt," wrote Beverley Tucker concerning his idolized half-brother, "if he ever became a convert to the views of Burke, until the events of the last four years of Mr. Jefferson's administration led him to suspect that there may be something in the enjoyment of liberty, which soon disqualifies a people for that self-government, which is but another name for freedom." From 1805 onward, however, Randolph applied to American questions those first principles enunciated by the philosopher of English conservatism.

Randolph's speeches and letters have never been collected, so one must grope through the dusty volumes of the *Annals of Congress* and fumble with tattered Richmond newspapers to catch the echo of his arrogantly beautiful

rhetoric, which once astounded the American nation. How orotund and superficial the addresses of Webster and Clay now seem by the side of this darting passion ! A theme which runs through all his greater speeches is the conviction that the democratic proclivity for enacting positive legislation on every subject is a menace to liberty and order. The South has not yet forgotten this injunction against presumptuous legislating, which Calhoun related still more closely to the peculiar problems of Southern society.

"We see about November—about the time the fogs set in—men enough assembled in the various Legislatures, General and State, to make a regiment," said Randolph, in 1816, to the House of Representatives ; "then the legislative maggot begins to bite ; then exists the rage to make new and repeal old laws. I do not think we would find ourselves at all worse off if no law of a general nature had been passed by either General or State Governments for the ten or twelve years last past. Like Mr. Jefferson, I am averse to too much regulation—averse to making the extreme medicine of the Constitution our daily food."

To this theme, Randolph returned at intervals throughout his life. For him, prescriptive right, common law, and custom afford the real guarantees of justice and liberty. When a people begin to think that they can improve society infinitely by incessant alteration of positive law, nothing remains settled ; every right, every bit of property, every one of those dear attachments to the permanence of family, home, and countryside is endangered. Such a people soon presume themselves collectively to be omniscient, and the further their affairs fall into confusion, the more enthusiastic they become for some legislative panacea which promises to cut all knots in Gordian fashion. "For my part, I wish we could have done nothing but talk, unless, indeed, we had gone off to sleep for many years past ; and, coinciding in the sentiment which had fallen from the gentleman from New York, give me fifty speeches, I care not how dull or stupid, rather than see one law upon the statute book," Randolph told Congress. "We are a fussy and fudgical people," he said once.

The United States in particular are cursed with this modern urge to alter, mutilate, and paralyse by legislative fiat, and the cause of this American delusion is a wide and imprac-

tical interpretation of the doctrines of natural equality. Randolph agreed with Smith, Say, and Ricardo that economic man is most prosperous when left to his own devices, and therefore he abhorred legislative regulation of commerce. Adhering to the old English view that a parliamentary body really is an assembly of critics, he declared that the regular function of Congress and the state legislatures is not the *creation* of law, but rather the supervision of its just enforcement. Popular vanity does not rest content with this limitation of practical sovereignty, however, endeavouring instead to interfere in an immense variety of private concerns. "I must be permitted to say, that there exists, in the nature of man, *ab ovo, ab origine*, of degraded and fallen man—for the first-born was a murderer—a disposition to escape from our own proper duties, to undertake the duties of somebody or anybody else." A people who indulge this disposition in themselves soon are like sea-lawyers in the fore-castle, their miserable actual state contrasting with the grandiloquence of their legal pretensions. On the road from Washington to Roanoke, said Randolph, this high-flying beggary exhibits itself at every inn, squalid as a Spanish *venta* : "We hug our lousy cloaks around us, take another *chaw of tubbaker*, float the room with nastiness, or ruin the grate and fire-irons, where they happen not to be rusty, and try conclusions upon constitutional points." The Academy of Lagado is a fit model for a state committed to perpetual meddling with its laws.

By this disillusion with the practices of democratic republics, Randolph was led to examine the foundations upon which American levelling ideas were established. He found those bases perilously insecure. John Randolph of Roanoke wholly repudiated the common interpretation of the Declaration of Independence, denounced Jefferson as a Pied Piper, and turned his back upon political abstractions to seek security in prescription and in an unbroken vigilance over personal and local rights. As Burke had chosen Rousseau and Paine for his antagonists, as John Adams had scourged Turgot and Condorcet, Randolph selected Thomas Jefferson, whose "jewels were Bristol stones," as his natural adversary. "As the Turks follow their sacred standard, which is a

pair of Mahomet's green breeches, we are governed by the old red breeches of that Prince of Projectors, St. Thomas of Cantingbury; and surely Becket himself never had more pilgrims at his shrine than the saint of Monticello."

Men are not born free and equal, said Randolph. Their physical, moral, and intellectual differences are manifest, to say nothing of their differences in birth and wealth. To presume that a mystic "equality" entitled the mass of mankind to tinker at pleasure with society, to play with it as a toy, to exercise their petty ingenuity upon it, is to reduce mankind to the only state of life in which anything resembling equality of condition actually prevails: savagery. Jeffersonian levelling doctrines, if taken literally, mean anarchy, "the chrysalis state of despotism."

"In regard to this principle, that all men are born free and equal, if there is an animal on earth to which it does not apply—that is not born free, it is man—he is born in a state of the most abject want, and in a state of perfect helplessness and ignorance, which is the foundation of the conubial tie. . . . Who should say that all the soil in the world is equally rich, the first rate land in Kentucky and the Highlands of Scotland, because the superficial content of the acre is the same, would be just as right as he who should maintain the absolute equality of man in virtue of his birth. The rickety and scrofulous little wretch who first sees the light in a work-house, or in a brothel, and who feels the effects of alcohol before the effects of vital air, is not equal in any respect to the ruddy offspring of the honest yeoman; nay, I will go further, and say that a prince, provided he is no better born than royal blood will make him, is not equal to the healthy son of a peasant."

In this, Randolph's view is identical with that of the statesman whose overthrow had been Randolph's early political endeavour—John Adams. Speaking as a devout Christian, a member of "the Church of England, sir," no mere American Episcopalian, Randolph proceeds to describe the fallibility of man, his credulity, his egotism, his indolence, his violence. Man is corrupt; and therefore his best hope for attaining justice and freedom lies in keeping the hands of ambitious men from that power which invites corruption. "None but the people can forge their own chains; and to flatter the people and delude them by promises never meant to be performed is the

stale but successful practice of the demagogue, as of the seducer in private life." Being weak, man may possibly be trusted with his own freedom, but he cannot be relied upon to respect other men's liberty, unless the great forces of prescription and veneration demarcate his sphere of governance. Positive law, recently decreed by some transitory congress or other body, lacks this buttressing and circumscribing influence of tradition and prejudice; therefore the public should enact new positive law only under the stress of urgent necessity. Rulers will take liberties with new laws where they never would dare infringe upon the old. Even the Constitution of the United States is not sufficiently venerable to restrain the appetites of ambitious men and classes; and the potentialities for increase of power which lie hid in some of its clauses are ominous for the future liberties of America. In the last resort, once men have got into the vice of legislating indiscriminately for immediate purposes and special interests, only force can withstand the masked arbitrary brutality of "laws" that are no better than exactions. The proposed tariffs of 1824, he cried, were "laws" of this description, designed to plunder one section of the nation for the benefit of another section:

"With all the fanatical and preposterous theories about the rights of man (the *theories*, and not the rights themselves, I speak of), there is nothing but power that can restrain power. . . . You may entrench yourself in parchment to the teeth, says Lord Chatham, the sword will find its way to the vitals of the constitution. I have no faith in parchment, sir, I have no faith in the abracadabra of the constitution; I have no faith in it. . . . There never was a constitution under the sun, in which, by an unwise exercise of the powers of government, the people may not be driven to the extremity of resistance by force. . . . If, under a power to regulate trade, you draw the last drop of blood from our veins; if, *secundum artem*, you draw the last shilling from our pockets, what are the checks of the constitution to us? A fig for the constitution! When the scorpion's sting is probing us to the quick, shall we pause to chop logic? Shall we get some learned and cunning clerk to say whether the power to do this is to be found in the constitution, and then, if he, from whatever motive, shall maintain the affirmative, like the animal whose fleece forms so material a part of this bill, quietly lie down and be sheared?"

The facile assumption that men may safely be entrusted with much power over one another has led to the tariff, internal improvements, and

fanciful schemes of foreign policy, all conspiring to beggar one part of the nation to the profit of another part. Abstract sentimentality ends in real brutality. Condorcet, Brissot, and Mirabeau were men of good intentions, learning, even genius ; but they were metaphysically mad ; they trusted in parchment and political gimcracks, regardless of the frailty of human reason, the corruption of human character, and the great dominant interests of civilized life. They insisted upon absolute liberty, or nothing ; and they got the latter, or rather something worse :

“What was the consequence of not stopping with the imprescriptible rights of man, in the abstract ? It is that they now have full leisure to meditate on the imprescriptible rights of kings in the concrete. . . . I have seen men who could not write a book, or even make a speech—who could not even spell this famous word Congress (they spelled it with a K) who had more practical sense and were more trustworthy, as statesmen, or generals, than any mathematician, any naturalist, or any literati, under the sun.”

If the Constitution cannot be relied upon as a barrier against force and appetite, if the most capacious human intellects cannot apprehend the way to manage society, where may security against power be found ? Why, said Randolph, in habitually restricting the scope of government to narrow limits, and in basing all government, and participation therein, upon practical considerations, rather than upon the fancies of the *philosophes* and of Jefferson. Let the objects of government be few and clearly defined ; let all important powers, in America, be reserved to the several states (as the framers of the Constitution intended), outside the scope of federal authority. Astute lovers of freedom will assert state rights constantly, so that personal and local liberties may endure ; the smaller the unit of government, the less possibility of usurpation, and the more immediate and powerful the operation of prescriptive influences. “I for one cling to them,” said Randolph of the several states, “because in clinging to them, I cling to my country because I love my country as I do my immediate connexions ; for the love of country is nothing more than the love of every man for his wife, child, or friend. I am not for a policy which must end in the destruction, too, of the whole

of the State Governments.” So he replied to Calhoun, in January, 1816. Calhoun never forgot that debate ; and some few years later, he began to sacrifice his consuming ambition, his hope of the presidency of the United States, to the defence of those rights his aristocratic adversary had described.

Randolph's second security for justice and liberty lay in common-sense government. “Mr. Chairman, I go for solid security.” Most men may be trusted to choose their own representatives, but few can be trusted further, in politics ; illusions of direct democracy lead to direct tyranny. The franchise should be the privilege of citizens whose stake in the commonwealth, and whose moral character, to some extent lift them above the temptations of power to which corrupt human nature is terribly susceptible. Freeholders only should have the vote ; property must have its special representation and protection, since property travels with power—“You can only cause them to change hands” ; and if power be transferred to the propertyless, soon they will make themselves affluent. Government is not a matter of simple nose-counting : “No, sir, a negro boy with a knife and a tally-stick is a statesman complete in this school.” King Numbers, the principle of determining profound questions (really matters to be settled by application of high moral principles and enlightened expediency) by a tally of heads, is the iron despot of modern times. The application of “democratic methods” arbitrarily to every controversy, heedless of particular circumstances and intricacies, is consummate stupidity. “It is not an incantation. It is no talisman. It is not witchcraft. It is not a torpedo to benumb us.” Randolph declared he would flee from old Virginia, if the time came when this notion should be applied in all its rigour. Taxation without representation certainly is tyranny, yet precisely this is introduced by democrats who give power to the unpropertied classes : men of property, the rampart of a state, are abandoned to be plundered at discretion by the ochlocracy.

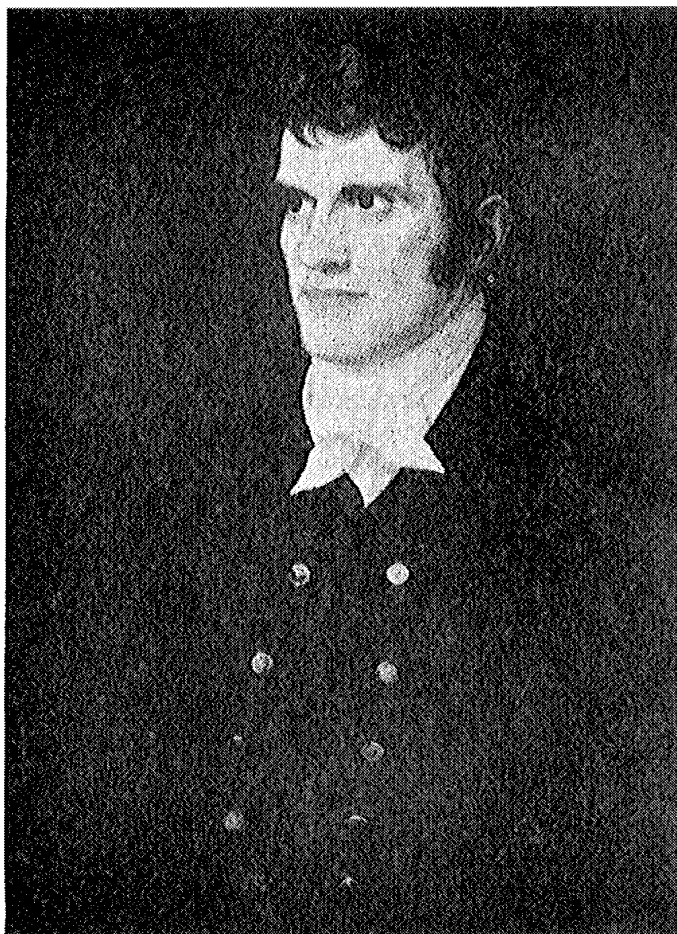
But Jeffersonian political doctrines would not down ; they would efface his beloved “country,” Old Virginia, Randolph knew ; and by the time of the Virginia Convention of

1829-30, their complete triumph was at hand in the Old Dominion. Marshall was at the Convention, and Madison, and Monroe, old men all of them, and all perturbed by this wave of constitutional revision that was sweeping through the seaboard states. Then Randolph's shrill voice rose above the bumble of talk, and the Convention listened in an uneasy silence to his supreme warning against the democratic propensity for incessant alteration. "Change is not reform," he repeated; he eulogized the old constitution of Virginia as Burke had defended old English ways; he spoke up for the preponderance of the wealthier eastern counties, for the aristocratic county courts, for the freehold suffrage, for the vestiges of English institutions. All these were swept away, in 1830, but Randolph's words outlive the political constitution that evoked them. In the history of American political thought, there have been few speeches or essays so abundant in striking truths and flashes of insight as his opening address at the Convention.

Mr. Chairman, the wisest thing this body could do, would be to return to the people from whom they came, *re infecta*. I am very willing to lend my aid to any very small and moderate reforms, which I can be made to believe that this our ancient Government requires. But, far better would it be that they were never made, and that our Constitution remained unchangeable like that of Lycurgus, than that we should break in upon the main pillars of the edifice. . . .

It has been better said, than I am capable of saying it, that the lust of innovation—for it is a lust—that is the proper term for an unlawful desire—this lust of innovation—this *rerum novarum lubido*—has been the death of all Republics. . . . Recollect that change is not always amendment. Remember that you have to reconcile to new institutions the whole mass of those who are contented with what they have, and seek no change—and besides these, all the disappointed of the other class.

On December 30, 1829, he opposed the insertion of any amending-clause in the new constitution, any invitation to the "maggot of innovation," any suggestion that might arouse the tinkering passions of the next decade or the next generation. Change comes soon enough without paving the way for it. "Sir, the great opprobrium of popular Government is its *instability*. It was this which made the people of our Anglo-Saxon stock cling with such pertinacity to an independent judiciary, as the



By courtesy of the National Gallery of Art, Washington

CALHOUN as Secretary of War, by Rembrandt Peale

only means they could find to resist this vice of popular Governments. . . . A people may have the best form of Government that the wit of man ever devised; and yet, from its uncertainty alone, may, in effect, live under the worst Government in the world."

In almost his last remarks at the Convention, Randolph spoke of "a principle which he had learned before he came into public life; and by which he had been governed during the whole course of his life, that it was unwise—yes, highly unwise—to disturb a thing that was at rest." Here shone the essence of this fierce and gallant man's political wisdom. He had begun as a "*Jacobin enragé*," and he had learned that society cannot be mended on Procrustes' bed. He saw his Old Virginia dissolving round him; he heard the slavery-

question "fire-bell in the night" tolling ever louder; in his last year of existence, the Tariff of Abominations and the Force Act threatened to reduce the South to the condition of a subject province. Randolph had hoped that he might end "like a gamecock in the pit"; and while Nullification dismayed America, John Randolph of Roanoke expired as he had lived, with a fantastic nobility.

He left a successor whose ambitions he had always suspected and who at that moment seemed close to ruin: John Caldwell Calhoun. A few years more, and Calhoun, the son of a heavy-handed frontier democrat, would write that Jeffersonian theories of equality were pernicious:

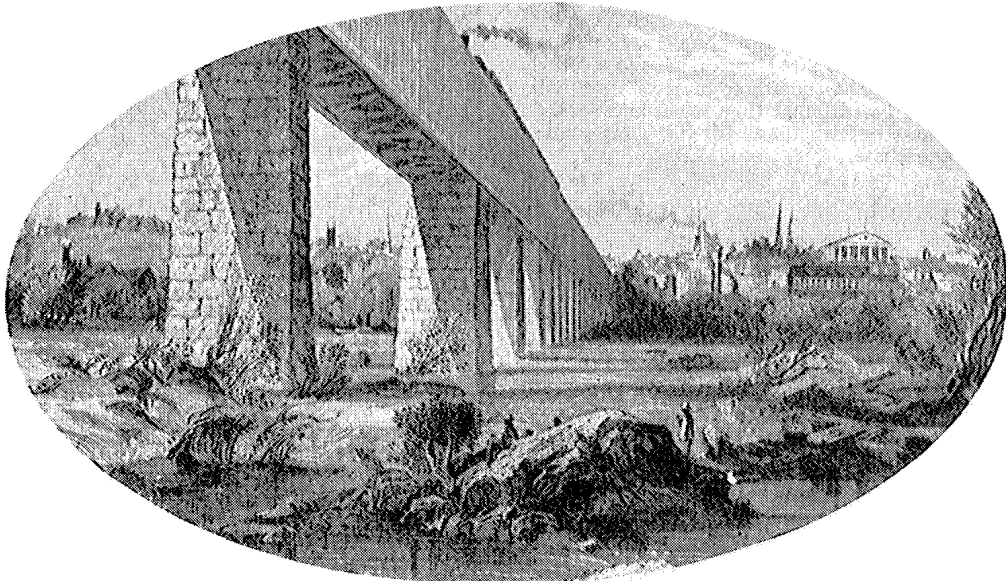
We now begin to experience the danger of admitting so great an error to have a place in the declaration of our independence. . . . Instead, then, of all men having the same right to liberty and equality, as is claimed by those who hold that they are all born free and equal, liberty is the noble and highest reward bestowed on mental and moral development, combined with favourable circumstances.

The Southern planter-society, which for a time wore an equalitarian mask, had come to perceive its own innate conservatism.

Both Randolph and Calhoun discerned the nature of the threat to their established society, but they could oppose to the revolutionary energies of consolidation, secularization, industrialism, and levelling scarcely more than their solitary vaticinations and their ability to rouse

a rough and confused spirit of particularism among the mass of Southerners. This was not enough. Despite its faults of head and heart, the South—alone among the civilized communities of the nineteenth century—had resolution sufficient for an appeal to arms against the iron new order which, an instinct whispered to Southerners, was terribly inimical to the sort of humanity they knew. Grant and Sherman ground their valour into powder, Emancipation and Reconstruction demolished the loose structure of their old society, economic subjugation forced them into the productive machine of modern times. No political philosophy has had a briefer span of triumph than that accorded Randolph's and Calhoun's.

Yet they deserve to be remembered, these devoted Southern leaders. They illustrate the truth that conservatism is something deeper than mere defence of shares and dividends, something nobler than mere dread of what is new; their arguments, and even their failure, reveal how intricately linked are economic change, state policy, and the fragile tissue of social tranquillity. Perhaps Randolph and Calhoun did not employ to the full that conservative virtue of prudence which Burke so often commends. But their provocation was severe; and the echo of the fight which a doomed Southern conservatism waged in the name of prescriptive rights has not yet died in the enormous, smoky cavern of modern American life.



Richmond in the nineteenth century